Considering Contexts in Educational Psychology: Introduction to the Special Issue

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The impetus for this special issue grew from our observation of an ongoing call from researchers, symposium discussants, and journal editors for increased attention to contextual effects in the study of educational psychology. For example, Goodenow (1992) argued that an ecologically valid psychology of education must include an understanding of the social and interpersonal processes that make up the social context of schooling. More recently, Pintrich (1994), in speculating about directions for research in educational psychology, included an increased focus on the role of contexts and culture in shaping students’ cognitions as a major issue that confronts research activities in the field. Similarly, Solomon (1995) noted that the traditionally espoused assumption that “most if not all that is important and interesting in educational psychology lies in the study of the decontextualized individual” (p. 105), which underlies much of the work in our field, needs to be seriously revised. Solomon went on to suggest that there is a growing demand for greater ecological validity and practical relevance of our research and that these demands require that we change our focus to include individuals “within wider psychological, disciplinary, social and cultural contexts” (p. 106). In part, educational psychologists’ interest in contexts reflects trends in the study of cognitive development that emphasize the social nature of human learning (e.g., Rogoff, 1990; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Valsch, 1985). It also reflects the growth of interdisciplinary research programs and the influence of theory and research in fields such as social psychology and sociology.

Whereas many researchers now agree with the importance of considering context in their work, the challenges of doing so are many. One set of challenges revolves around conceptual issues related to what context is and how persons and situations interact. A second but related set of challenges involves methodological issues in terms of how to go about measuring and analyzing contextual effects. Goodenow (1992) noted that educational psychologists need to add to the methods they typically use. More specifically, we need to incorporate other methods more traditionally used in fields such as sociology, sociolinguistics, and anthropology.

In putting this special issue together, we selected authors who are grappling with these issues in their own work. As is readily apparent, each brings a different approach to the study of contexts, including utilizing widely varying definitions, theoretical perspectives, and methodologies. In each article, the authors discuss both conceptual and methodological challenges they have faced in their ongoing research programs, using examples from recent studies for illustration.

QUESTIONS RAISED IN THE STUDY OF CONTEXTS

What Dimensions and Levels of Context Do We Measure?

Much research on contexts has focused on what Bronfenbrenner (1978) termed the microsystem. For example, in this issue Ryan discusses peer groups, whereas Turner and Meyer discuss classrooms. Turner and Meyer describe that in the history of classroom research there has been great variance in the dimensions of classrooms considered important for study. Similarly, as Ryan points out, definitional and level of analysis issues are central in considering peer influences. Other authors in this issue discuss a more macro level of context. For example, Lee focuses on the school as a whole, whereas Murdock focuses on students’ economic status as a context. Stigler, Gallimore, and Hiebert examine classrooms cross-culturally—thus grappling with both micro and macro levels simultaneously.

Whose Perspective Do We Attend To?

In educational psychological research often there is a tendency to take a phenomenological view and assume that stu-
Students’ perceptions are the most powerful predictor available. Alternative perspectives are also important, however. This topic is highlighted in this issue by Stigler, Gallimore, and Hiebert’s discussion about the number and location of video cameras used in video-based studies of classroom context. Similarly, Turner and Meyer discuss the importance of incorporating multiple perspectives (e.g., those of students, teachers, and researchers). Once a researcher has collected data from multiple sources, the challenge of integrating different perspectives that may contradict one another remains. As pointed out by Ryan, a key issue in studying peer influences relates to whether one should attend to students’ perceptions of their peers’ behaviors and attitudes or to the actual behaviors and attitudes reported by those peers.

Different Participants’ Experiences

A related question is how to manage differences in participants’ experiences. What are the appropriate ways to aggregate data, and how do we deal with the nested nature of much educational data? That is, students function within peer groups or classrooms that function within schools, districts, neighborhoods, and larger cultural contexts. In this regard, the development of multilevel analysis techniques, such as hierarchical linear modeling represents a major step forward for quantitative researchers. In this issue, Lee argues that contextual studies in education are, by definition, multilevel studies that require multilevel designs and analyses. She provides an introduction to the use of hierarchical linear modeling to study school effects. This technique clearly has application in the study of other contexts (e.g., see Ryan, this issue).

Changing Contexts

Another challenge for researchers is dealing with the fluid nature of contexts over time. It is clear that longitudinal studies have advantages over one-shot data collection, but the problem is more complex than this solution suggests. For example, when is it appropriate to create some kind of mean experience over time, and when do we need to attend to particular salient experiences that overshadow day-to-day routines? In this issue, Stigler, Gallimore, and Hiebert discuss this topic in terms of the coding of tapes and the importance of not overemphasizing a memorable event. Alternatively, Turner and Meyer discuss the need for an ongoing researcher presence in the setting. In addition, new methodologies such as experience sampling offer possibilities here, as do quantiative advances such as growth curve and trend analyses.

It is obvious that the challenges inherent in considering contexts in educational psychology are great, and five articles cannot provide an exhaustive treatment of all the possible issues. Our goal for this special issue is to provide a set of interesting and stimulating articles that highlight the challenges and describe some potential solutions. In bringing these articles together, we hope to provoke further discussion and ongoing exploration of educational psychology in context.

REFERENCES


